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### Causes and consequences of the utilization of work-life policies by professionals

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# Chapter 13

## Causes and Consequences of the Utilization of Work-Life Policies by Professionals: “Unconditional Supervisor Support Required”

Bram Peper, Josje Dijkers, Claartje Vinkenburch, and Marloes van Engen

### 13.1 Introduction

The European workplace has changed. Employees increasingly ask for organizational policies that allow them to combine their work and their private lives (Lewis et al., 2009). In the Netherlands it is estimated that no less than 40% of employees face troubles in combining their work and private lives (Geurts et al., 2003), which brings high costs, both for individuals and for organizations (Allen et al., 2000). Organizations also increasingly have become aware of the work-life conflicts of their employees. Work-life conflict is often defined as a form of inter role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, “participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role” (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985, p. 77). In addition to these negative influences between work and home, researchers nowadays also differentiate positive influences between the two domains: work-life enrichment or facilitation. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) recently defined work-life enrichment as “the extent to which experiences in one role improve performance or the quality of life in the other role” (p. 73).

According to recent work-life studies, the utilization of work-life policies does not unequivocally lead to lower levels of conflict or to higher levels of enrichment between work and life. Kossek et al. (2006), for example, found that formal access to telework may not necessarily reduce work-to-life conflict for professionals who typically already have some informal job autonomy. Formal use of telework was, however, significantly related to higher performance, although other work-life policies were not. It is, therefore, vital to distinguish between different types of policies; policies that enable employees to work while they can hire others for their caring tasks, and policies that give employees more flexibility and control over their working time which enables them to fulfill the caring tasks themselves (cf. Appelbaum et al., 2005). In this study, we examine the association of the utilization of flexible

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policies (targeted at increasing employees' temporal and spatial flexibility) and care-related policies (aimed at assisting employees in combining work with care giving) with work-life enrichment of professionals.

Research further suggests that managerial support is critical when it comes to the utilization and effectiveness of work-life programs (e.g. Allen et al., 2000; Fried, 1999; Maxwell, 2005; Perlow, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999; Veenis, 2000), as it is up to managers or supervisors to communicate, implement and manage work-life policies in organizations (Lewis, 2003). In addition, research consistently shows that the level of support that employees receive from their supervisor is crucial in alleviating conflicts between work and life (e.g., Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2006). Supervisor support is a core aspect of work-life culture, or "the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees' work and private lives" (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 394). Case study research emphasizes that managerial attitudes and practices are shaped by the organizational culture in which managers operate. A manager's response to a request is influenced not only by official policy, but also by the "unwritten rules" of an employing organization. Such "unwritten rules" (the set of shared assumptions, opinions and values, also referred to as "organizational culture") are a decisive factor in managers' attitudes (Lewis and Taylor, 1996; Perlow, 1995). Fried (1999) shows that in a company with a typical "overtime" culture – one in which working long hours is regarded as a sign of productivity and commitment – managers regard requests to take parental leave or the actual utilization of such leave as contrary to the prevailing standards. In their view, taking parental leave is a sign of a "negative" attitude, with all that that implies for the relevant employee's career. On the one hand, managers are influenced by the organizational culture in which they operate (Kossek and Friede, 2006); on the other hand, the way managers respond to requests by employees can change – or maintain – an organizational culture. Consequently, this study also relates work-life culture in general and supervisor support in particular to the uptake of (flexible and care-related) work-life policies and work-life enrichment.

Finally, few previous studies have examined the associations of work-life integration with professionals' career progression. In their review of work-life studies, Eby et al. (2005) showed that career attitudes (e.g., career mobility and career satisfaction) were not frequently studied as criteria (2.9% of the studies included in the review). Objective career success in particular has rarely been related to work-life balance. Here, we study the associations of utilization of work-life policies, work-life culture and work-life enrichment with professionals' career advancement.

In this chapter, the utilization and management of work-life policies by professionals is the central focus. In Sect. 13.2 we will analyze the utilization of work-life policies in association with work-life culture, work-life enrichment, and career advancement among Dutch professionals. This analysis is based on survey research in two samples.

In Sect. 13.3 we elaborate on the role of supervisors in the (non-)utilization of policies by professionals employed by a Dutch financial organization. This analysis is based on qualitative interviews. Supervisors were interviewed on the use of

work-life policies by their employees, and their attitude toward granting work-life policy requests. Section [Sect. 13.4](#) is devoted to the conclusion and discussion.

13.2 Utilization of Work-Life Policies by Dutch Professionals

in Association with Work-Life Culture, Work-Life

Enrichment and Career Advancement

This section aims to answer four research questions:

1. What is the utilization of work-life policies among Dutch professionals?
2. What is the association of work-life policies with work-life culture?
3. What is the association of work-life policies and work-life culture with work-life enrichment?
4. What is the association of utilization of work-life policies with career advancement?

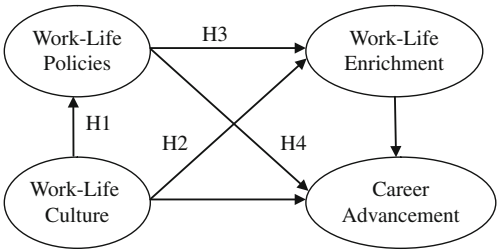
These questions will be answered by examining two Dutch samples: (i) a Dutch subsidiary of a financial consultancy with headquarters in the United States of America ( $N = 638$ ) that will be referred to as Company X, and (ii) a more heterogeneous sample with Dutch professionals from different sectors ( $N = 131$ ) which we will refer to as Sample Y. In both samples, the same questionnaire has been administered, in order to collect data on professionals' utilization of work-life policies, their work-to-life (and life-to-work) balance or enrichment (measured with the SWING; Geurts et al., 2005), and their perceptions of their company's work-life culture (see Dijkers et al., 2007).

In this section, four hypotheses will be developed on the basis of the four research questions described above. A graphical depiction of the relationships between the main variables is given in [Fig. 13.1](#).

13.2.1 Utilization of Work-Life Policies by Professionals

In order to answer our first research question – What is the utilization of work-life policies among Dutch professionals? –, we selected those employees with a job at

**Fig. 13.1** Research model reflecting the hypotheses tested in [Sect. 13.2.1](#)



the (lower, intermediate, or higher/top) management level. Thus we ensured that all the employees in the sample were professionals with executive responsibilities. The work-life policies selected can be divided into *flexible* (i.e., targeted at increasing employees' spatial or temporal flexibility) and *care-related* (i.e., aimed at assisting employees in combining work with care giving responsibilities) arrangements. We examined professionals' utilization of four flexible work-life policies (flextime, working from home, part-time work, and compressed workweek) and two care-related work-life policies (parental leave, and childcare subsidies by the employer). Two of these policies are the subject of legislation in the Netherlands (i.e., part-time work, and parental leave) and therefore can be used by all employees who are eligible, whereas the other arrangements are part of the selected companies' employment contracts. In Company X, the compressed workweek was not offered.

In Table 13.1, the percentages of professionals (parents versus non-parents, and men versus women) using these work-life policies within the two samples is given. In Company X, flexible working times (flextime; 51%) and working from home (40%) were the most frequently used policies in the total sample, followed by part-time work (29%), childcare arrangements (12%), and parental leave (5%). We found two significant gender differences in utilization of work-life policies, with men making more use of working from home ( $t_{(1,592)} = 4.35, p < 0.001$ ) and women working part time more frequently ( $t_{(1,451)} = -9.97, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, parents made significantly more use of flextime ( $t_{(1,451)} = 3.01, p < 0.01$ ), working from home ( $t_{(1,414)} = 5.23, p < 0.001$ ), and part-time work ( $t_{(1,393)} = 4.26, p < 0.001$ ) compared with professionals without children in Company X.

In the more heterogeneous Sample Y, flextime (63%), working from home (35%), and part-time work (25%) also constituted the most popular policies. The arrangements that were used least frequently were the compressed workweek (8%), childcare subsidy (6%), and parental leave (3%). Again, women worked part time more often than men ( $t_{(1,129)} = 5.81, p < 0.001$ ). In the Netherlands, more than 60% of women work part time, working on average 24 h per week (OECD, 2007). Consequently, the Netherlands has the highest rate of female part-time work throughout the OECD countries. Parents also used this particular policy more often compared with professionals without children in this sample ( $t_{(1,126)} = 3.10, p < 0.01$ ). This renders additional support to the idea that Dutch parents (in particular mothers) use part-time work as a means to combine work with care giving responsibilities.

### 13.2.2 Work-Life Policies in Relation to Work-Life Culture

The second research question guiding this section – What is the association of work-life policies with work-life culture? – focuses on the uptake of work-life policies in association with work-life culture (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 394). According to a review of work-life culture studies (Kinnunen et al., 2005), employees experiencing a supportive culture toward the integration of work and private life make more frequent use of work-life policies. Here we distinguish between two central dimensions

Table 13.1 Professionals' utilization of work-life policies (in percentages)

	Company X			Sample Y						
	Total (N = 638)	Men Parents (N = 138)	(N = 354) Non- parents (N = 216)	Women Parents (N = 88)	(N = 284) Non- parents (N = 196)	Total (N = 131)	Men Parents (N = 51)	(N = 74) Non- parents (N = 23)	Women Parents (N = 30)	(N = 57) Non- parents (N = 24) <sup>a</sup>
Policies										
Flextime	51.1	59.0	49.5	59.5	43.3	63.4	66.7	52.2	66.7	58.3
Working from home	39.9	63.2	37.4	39.0	26.5	35.1	35.3	30.4	43.3	29.2
Part time	29.1	10.4	15.5	86.9	31.9	25.2	7.8	4.3	73.3	16.7
Compressed workweek	—	—	—	—	—	8.4	5.9	8.7	13.3	8.3
Parental leave	5.0	6.1	—	25.6	—	3.1	2.0	—	10.0	—
Childcare subsidy	11.6	22.1	—	46.4	—	6.1	11.8	—	6.7	—

<sup>a</sup>Due to missing values not all subgroups add up to N = 131 in Sample Y; Significant subgroup differences are reflected by: \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

of work-life culture (see Dikkers et al., 2004, 2007): (i) *support* from the organization, supervisor and colleagues regarding the integration of employees' work and family life, and (ii) *barriers* reflected by negative career consequences associated with the utilization of work-life arrangements and organizational demands to make long work days.

We expect that employees who perceive their company's culture toward work-life balance and the uptake of work-life policies to be supportive will feel more comfortable in using these arrangements than employees perceiving a less supportive or even hindering work-life culture. Therefore, it is expected that employees perceiving a supportive work-life culture will make more use of work-life policies compared with those perceiving an unsupportive culture.

Hypothesis 1: High levels of work-life culture support and low levels of barriers to it are related to high utilization of work-life policies

In order to test this hypothesis, we performed a series of hierarchical regression analyses. The work-life policies were entered separately as dependent variables, and in a first step, the covariates (i.e., gender, and parental status) were entered as the independent variables. In a second step, work-life culture (support and barriers) was added to the covariates. The results of these regression analyses for those policies that are significantly related to perceptions of work-life culture are represented in Table 13.2 for both samples.

In Sample Y, the utilization of two policies was significantly related to work-life culture. High levels of culture supportive of work-life integration were associated with high utilization of working from home ( $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$ ). In other words, employees who perceive their organization's culture as supportive toward the integration of work and private life work from home more frequently compared with those who perceive the culture to be less supportive. Furthermore, barriers to a culture supportive of work-life integration were positively related to utilization of childcare subsidies ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.05$ ). Possibly, the causal path linking culture to this specific policy is "reversed" in nature: Only when employees start using this policy will they be confronted with barriers to the integration of work and private life.

In Company X, positive associations were found between cultural barriers to work-life integration and the utilization of three policies; working from home ( $\beta = 0.14, p < 0.001$ ), childcare subsidy ( $\beta = 0.10, p < 0.01$ ), and parental leave ( $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.05$ ). Again, it may be possible that as soon as employees start using these particular policies they will be confronted with barriers to the integration of work and private life. The work-life culture within this particular company may be predominantly "contradictory" or "obstructing" in nature. This means that employees perceive high levels of both support and barriers, respectively, or low levels of support and high barriers in balancing work with private life.

In sum, Hypothesis 1 (High levels of work culture supportive of work-life integration and low levels of barriers to it are related to high utilization of work-life policies) is only supported for the utilization of working from home in Sample Y.

**Table 13.2** Covariates (Model 1) and work-life culture (Model 2) in relation to work-life policy uptake in Sample Y and Company X

	Sample Y (N = 131)				Company X (N = 638)			
	Childcare subsidy		Working from home		Childcare subsidy		Working from home	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-0.06	-0.02	0.05	0.04	0.15***	0.16***	-0.16***	-0.15***
Parental status <sup>b</sup>	19*	0.21*	0.09	0.07	0.48***	0.48***	0.20***	0.19***
Culture – support	-	-0.04	-	0.29**	-	-0.01	-	0.03
Culture – barriers	-	0.22*	-	0.16	-	-	-	0.14***
F	2.79	3.43*	0.60	2.63*	95.45***	50.51***	22.08***	14.02***
Δ R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.10*	0.01	0.08*	0.24***	0.25*	0.07***	0.08**

<sup>a</sup> 1 = men, 2 = women  
<sup>b</sup> 0 = non-parents, 1 = parents  
\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$



### ***13.2.3 Work-Life Policies and Work-Life Culture in Relation to Work-Life Enrichment***

As part of the third research question – What is the association of work-life policies and work-life culture with work-life enrichment? – we wanted to examine the utilization of work-life policies and work-life culture in relation to work-life enrichment. In their recent meta-analysis, Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2006) examined the effectiveness of five facets of family-friendly work environments in reducing work-life conflict. The 38 studies (total  $N = 13,605$ ) included in the meta-analysis showed that a family-friendly work culture was the most influential factor in reducing work-life conflict.

This suggests that perceiving a culture supportive of the integration of work and private life is favorable in terms of reduced levels of work-life conflict. In a similar vein, high levels of support and low levels of barriers are expected to be related to increased levels of work-life enrichment (Ten Brummelhuis, 2009; Van Steenbergen, 2007). Greenhaus and Powell (2006) recently defined work-life enrichment as “the extent to which experiences in one role improve performance or the quality of life in the other role” (p. 73). This definition is inherently bi-directional, and comprises both positive spillover from work to private life (work-life enrichment), and positive spillover from private life to work (life-work enrichment). We expect that employees who believe that their supervisor – or the organization in general – supports them in their integration of work and private life will perceive their work in a positive light, which will improve their quality of life or even their performance of tasks at home (i.e., work-life enrichment).

Hypothesis 2: High levels of work-life culture support and low levels of barriers are related to high levels of work-life enrichment.

Moreover, we examined the association of the utilization of work-life policies with work-life enrichment. When employees use policies aimed at facilitating them in integrating work and private life, they are expected to experience higher levels of work-life enrichment. More specifically, those using flexible arrangements (e.g., flextime) will have more freedom in adjusting their work to their responsibilities at home. This may increase the extent to which experiences in one role (either at work or at home) improve their performance or quality of life in the other role (i.e., work-life and life-work enrichment). Additionally, employees using care-related policies (e.g., parental leave) are assisted in fulfilling their care-related responsibilities, which may also increase positive spillover between work and private life. Therefore, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 3: Employees using work-life policies will report high levels of work-life and life-work enrichment.

To test these hypotheses, work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment were entered as the dependent variables in a series of regression analyses. The covariates were entered as the independent variables in a first step, and utilization of the work-life policies was added in a second step; in a final step, work-life culture was entered as an independent variable. The results of these regression analyses are given in Table 13.3 for both samples.

**Table 13.3** Covariates (Model 1), work-life policy uptake and work-life culture (Model 2/3) in relation to work-life enrichment in Company X and Sample Y

	Company X (N = 638)			Sample Y (N = 131)					
	Work-life enrichment			Work-life enrichment			Life-work enrichment		
	Model 1	Model 2		Model 1	Model 2		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender <sup>a</sup>	0.00	-0.02	0.10*	0.13	0.12	0.11	0.01	-0.10	-0.10
Parental status <sup>b</sup>	0.00	0.01	0.08*	-0.07	-0.09	-0.10	-0.08	-0.15	-0.15
Working from home		-	-	-	0.21*	0.16	-	-	-
Part time work		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.22*	0.22*
Culture – support		0.15***	0.15***	-	-	0.21*	-	-	0.05
Culture – barriers		-0.04	0.00	-	-	0.09	-	-	0.06
F	0.00	4.65***	4.98**	1.52	2.93*	2.67*	0.40	1.71	1.10
Δ R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.02***	0.01**	0.02	0.07*	0.10	0.01	0.04*	0.04

<sup>a</sup> 1 = men, 2 = women  
<sup>b</sup> 0 = non-parents, 1 = parents  
\* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

In Company X, utilization of the work-life policies was not significantly related to work-life enrichment or life-work enrichment. Work-life culture support was significantly and positively associated with both types of enrichment ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); professionals perceiving high levels of support in integrating work and private life reported high levels of positive spillover between both domains. However, only small amounts of variance in enrichment were explained by the covariates, work-life policies, and work-life culture in this company (varying from  $R^2 = 0.00$ , ns to  $R^2 = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In Sample Y, only utilization of working from home was related significantly to work-life enrichment ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). After adding work-life culture support to the equation in the third step ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), this association disappeared, however ( $\beta = 0.16$ , ns). Since utilization of this policy is significantly related to work-life culture support ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), this finding may hint at full mediation of the association of working from home with work-life enrichment via support. In other words, employees working from home perceive their organization as supportive of the integration of work and private life, and therefore report high levels of work-to-life enrichment. Furthermore, employees working part time reported high levels of life-to-work enrichment ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Work-life culture was not related significantly to life-work enrichment in this sample.

In sum, Hypothesis 2 (High levels of work-life culture support and low levels of barriers are related to high levels of work-life enrichment) is supported for the association of work-life culture support and work-life enrichment in Sample Y, and for the association of support with both types of enrichment in Company X. Hypothesis 3 (Employees using work-life policies will report high levels of work-life and life-work enrichment) is supported for two policies (i.e., working from home and part time work) in Sample Y.

### ***13.2.4 Work-Life Policies in Relation to Career Advancement***

A career is often defined as “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 8). Previous research conceptualizes career success as objective (extrinsic) and subjective (intrinsic) success (e.g., Judge et al., 1995; Ng et al., 2005). Extrinsic career success refers to objectively observable career accomplishments (e.g., salary) whereas intrinsic success relates to the individual’s own subjective feelings regarding his/her career accomplishment (e.g., career or job satisfaction). In the current study, we focus on job level as an indicator of objective or extrinsic career success.

In order to answer the final research question of this section – What is the association of utilization of work-life policies with career advancement? –, the utilization of flexible and care-related work-life policies (see Sect. 13.2.2 for a description of the selected policies) by Dutch professionals was related to job level among the heterogeneous sample of professionals from different sectors ( $N = 131$ ) which was previously referred to as Sample Y.

Previous research has found that availing themselves of work-life policies may harm employees’ career progress (Anderson et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 1999). Judiesch and Lyness (1999), for example, found that managers who took leave of absence were promoted less often and received smaller salary increases. Using these arrangements may signal lower commitment and perhaps even lower performance to the employer (Almer et al., 2004; Glass, 2004). In some organizational cultures, the amount of time spent at work is seen as the best indication of investment and career dedication by working parents (Perlow, 1995; Starrels, 1992). It is therefore not surprising that prior empirical research has indicated that transition to part-time work often has a negative influence on employees’ career options (Higgins et al., 2000; Tomlinson, 2006). Consequently, we expect that work-life policies that reduce professionals’ work hours (i.e., part time work, and parental leave) will result in negative career consequences. Utilization of the other flexible or care-related arrangements, however, does not significantly reduce the amount of work-related time, thereby not negatively affecting the professionals’ career prospects.

Hypothesis 4: Employees working part time or taking up parental leave have lower job levels compared to those working full time or not using parental leave.

In a series of regression analyses, career advancement (i.e., job level) was entered as the dependent variable. The covariates (i.e., gender and parental status) were entered as the independent variables in a first step, and utilization of the work-life policies was added in a second step. Because we are also interested in the associations of work-life culture and enrichment with career advancement, work-life culture and work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment were added to the independents in a third and fourth step respectively. The final results of these regression analyses are represented in Table 13.4 for Sample Y.

**Table 13.4** Covariates (Model 1), policy uptake (Model 2), work-life culture (Model 3), and enrichment (Model 4) in relation to job level in Sample Y (*N* = 131)

	Job level			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender <sup>a</sup>	−0.10	0.05	0.02	0.00
Parental status <sup>b</sup>	0.02	0.13	0.11	0.10
Part-time work <sup>c</sup>		−0.25*	−0.25*	−0.24*
Parental leave		−0.21*	−0.20*	−0.19*
Compressed week		0.15 <sup>#</sup>	0.14	0.14
Culture – support			0.09	0.08
Culture – barriers			−0.12	−0.12
Work-life enrichment				0.06
Life-work enrichment				−0.07
<i>F</i>	0.64	3.09*	2.85**	2.22*
Δ <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.11**	0.14	0.15

<sup>a</sup>1 = men, 2 = women  
<sup>b</sup>0 = non-parents, 1 = parents; <sup>c</sup>0 = no usage, 1 = usage  
<sup>#</sup> = *p* < 0.10, \* = *p* < 0.05, \*\* = *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* = *p* < 0.001

In Sample Y, employees working part time ( $\beta = -0.25, p < 0.05$ ) or using parental leave ( $\beta = -0.21, p < 0.05$ ) apparently have lower job levels compared with those working full time or not taking up parental leave. Usage of compressed workweek was marginally related to job level ( $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.10$ ); employees working on a  $4 \times 9$  schedule (compressed workweek) reported higher job levels than those working on a regular schedule. Work-life culture and enrichment were not related significantly to job level in this sample.

In sum, Hypothesis 4 (Employees working part time or taking up parental leave have lower job levels compared with those working full time or not using parental leave) is supported in Sample Y. The results presented in this section all point to the influence that companies – direct supervisors in particular – can have on professionals' uptake of work-life policies, their work-life enrichment or integration, and their career advancement. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of this influence, we will now examine the role that supervisors' attitudes and behavior play in professionals' utilization of work-life policies with the aid of a qualitative case study.

### 13.3 Role of Supervisors in Utilization of Work-Life Policies

#### *13.3.1 The Role of Supervisors for the Utilization of Work-Life Policies*

Despite the key role of supervisors in the practical implementation of work-life policies, few researchers have examined the factors that shape managerial attitudes and behavior (Den Dulk and De Ruijter, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Poelmans and Beham, 2005). Supervisors can influence the utilization of work-life policies in several ways. To start with, their influence lies in their response to work-life requests. Secondly, they influence the utilization of work-life policies by the way they supervise employees who make these requests on a day-to-day basis. Finally, their own use of work-life policies and/or the way they manage their own work-life issues can have an influence (Lewis, 2003).

Supervisors' behavior toward work-life policies may vary considerably. Yeandle et al. (2003) found four types of supervisors in relation to their knowledge and awareness of work-life policies. In order of decreasing interest in work-life policies, they distinguish: supervisors who take a "progressive" approach to work-life issues; supervisors who have a "vague" understanding of family-friendly policies; supervisors who displayed ignorance of family-friendly policies; and supervisors who were "resistant" to the family-friendly approach.

In this section we analyze the experiences and attitudes of supervisors concerning the utilization of work-life policies by their subordinates, based on interviews with managers in Company X. First we focus on the vision of the supervisors regarding the extent to which Company X is a caring organization. We then address the way supervisors deal with the two types of work-life policies, e.g., flexible and

care-related policies. Therefore, our fifth research question is: What are the experiences with and attitudes of supervisors regarding work-life policies? We conclude by discussing the behavior and attitudes on the allowance decisions of supervisors with regard to granting work-life policy requests of subordinates. Our final research question is: How can we understand the allowance decisions made by supervisors on work-life policy request by subordinates?

### ***13.3.2 Supervisory Experiences with and Attitudes on Flexible and Care-Related Policies***

In the fall of 2002 we interviewed eleven supervisors at their work place. These interviews were part of a larger research project regarding the utilization of work-life policies at Company X. All the supervisors were partners in Company X, and they were responsible for approving the work-life requests of their subordinates. The organizational work-life culture is very important for the utilization of work-life policies by employees, and it is also an important factor for their work-life balance. Company X is characterized by a contradictory work-life culture, with much support for work-life issues but at the same time barriers like time and career constraints (Den Dulk and Peper, 2007). Most of the supervisors experience Company X as an organization that takes good care of its employees and their work-life balance.

For people to be able to deal with the amount and pace of the work, as [an] organization you need to facilitate employees in such a way they can handle their work fitting their personal situation. (M007, female, 1964)

The contradictory aspect of the work-life culture is also clearly mentioned by the supervisors. To be a caring organization in the highly competitive financial sector in which Company X operates can be walking a tight rope.

As [an] organization we have to watch out not to proclaim two contradictory messages; because on the one hand we want to do a lot in relation to the work-life balance, and on the other hand we have productivity targets on which we put emphasis. These are messages which are at right angles to each other. (M007, female, 1964)

The contradictory aspect of the work-life culture at Company X was a constant factor in the interviews with the supervisors when we discussed their experiences and opinions on flexible and care-related policies.

#### **13.3.2.1 Flexible Policies**

We elaborate on three types of flexible policies: part-time work, working a day at home and telework. Most supervisors had subordinates using the part-time policy, which is a statutory right in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> The experiences with part-time work were mixed; good examples as well as bad examples were mentioned. However,

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<sup>1</sup>Employees are allowed to adjust their working hours, unless it conflicts heavily with organizational interests (Den Dulk, 2001).

when we asked the supervisors for their opinion of this policy, they were much more outspoken. Almost all supervisors mentioned a four-day week as the absolute minimum if you want to make a career within this company. On top of that, the employee is expected to be flexible.

I am not positive [about part time work]. I have nothing against it. Some part timers work for quite a while at our organization, and I am glad they keep working with us. The problem, however, is when people start working part time they lose their flexibility. Often as a result of having children. If the children have to be picked up from kindergarten, an employee cannot do a job which requires flexibility. [...] Four days a week will just do, but three is really not enough. (M003, male, 1960)

Although part-time work is a statutory right, and supervisors are not unsupportive towards its use, part-time work can interfere with managerial control. Most subordinates will be evaluated on their output, and visibility at the work place still is an important aspect for supervisors.

Sometimes it drives me crazy because I don't know who is working when, but I do have good experiences [with part time work]. (M007, female, 1964)

Company X is an organization where clients are of utmost importance, and some of the supervisors relate their opinion of the use of part-time work explicitly to the expectations of the clients.

Four days is all right, that's the law and nobody bothers. However, for us it becomes problematic when it becomes less than four days, in relation to our clients. You are not accessible for the client. If the client accepts that, it's ok. We have two 'girls' working for three days, and they have less clients and clients who accept it [working three days]. (M005, male, 1948)

It is manageable, but difficult in the organization. Sometimes clients think it is annoying, and it is difficult to realize because of the high work demands and the extensive amount of clients. (M009, male, 1964)

Next to part-time work, working a day at home and telework are both policies that provide employees with the flexibility to perform work-related tasks at home. There is an important difference between working a day at home and telework. The first is usually not a formal policy, and is often granted when subordinates have to finish work which requires undisturbed attention.

Occasionally it's handy. When you have to finish a report which needs much concentration. I do not promote it, but it is possible. (M008, male, 1960)

I think it's good for the employees who perform well. I forbid working at home to the people who don't perform well, otherwise it is not visible what they do. In any case I am unwilling towards a structural day working at home, I can't sell this to my client. (M011, female, 1967)

Telework on the other hand is a formal policy and means working from home on a structural basis. Therefore, telework is seen as more problematic by supervisors. Most supervisors mentioned the importance of working in a team, which requires visibility on the work floor. Next to this, supervisors especially mentioned the relation with the clients of Company X as a reason to restrict telework possibilities.

Negative. We don't allow it for employees in this team. It's not possible for me to tell a client one of our team cannot meet the client on for example Tuesday, because it is the team members' regular working at home day. (M011, female, 1967)

People who put in a request for telework to me, don't have a chance. I think they don't have much chance at Company X at all. Here not many have a positive attitude towards telework. (M005, male, 1948)

### 13.3.2.2 Care-Related Policies

Care-related policies are a more specific type of work-life policies. Whereas flexible policies can also be used to schedule leisure time, care-related policies are explicitly formulated for employees' caring tasks. Working people have to find a way to deal with the balance between work and caring duties. For instance, it is not possible to postpone the daily care of children because of heavy work demands at a certain time. We discussed supervisors' experiences with parental leave, child care, and request for short-term leave of absence as a consequence of a sudden family crisis, such as a sick child.

Parental leave is a statutory policy in the Netherlands, and the supervisors had no real problems with employees taking parental leave. However, most supervisors viewed parental leave as a policy mainly used by female employees.

Sometimes, the ladies attach parental leave to their maternity leave. The gentlemen don't take up parental leave. (M004, male, 1952)

Not all supervisors had experience with subordinates taking parental leave, but some feared the eventuality that several employees would use this policy at the same moment.

I don't want to think of the situation they take it up all at the same time. Then I would have an empty department. (M011, female, 1967)

Using parental leave does have career consequences, and considering the gendered aspect, this means that women are trading off their career to caring.

In fact it means you break off your career. After such a leave you have to start all over to build your portfolio. (M003, male, 1960)

We asked whether the supervisors thought child care should be a task of the organization. This question provided a wide range of answers, from supervisors who thought the organization should do more on this subject to managers who thought child care as being primarily a task of the parents.

No, I think it is the responsibility of the parents. How they wish to arrange it is their business. (M001, male, 1944)

Yes and no. No, because it is primarily one's own responsibility. On the other hand, you can facilitate your employees for a large part. And if you want to do something for your employees, then this is something you can take good care of. Also because, politically, it is not very well organized. (M012, male, 1965)



Parental leave and child care are long-term policies, whereas short-term leave is meant to help employees incidentally with unexpected care tasks. These events, especially those concerning one's relatives, can happen at any time.

That always is a priority. You need to help people out if they encounter sudden unexpected problems. If you don't do that, the employee will not work. Only, when you pay attention to this request for a while, you will notice that some employees never ask for help and others always. In that case you have to address this with that person. (M005, male, 1948)

However unfortunate this may be for the employee, supervisors are deal with this problem in the context of the need of the organization, and their responsibility towards the rest of the team.

You can't refuse, of course, but it is not comfortable and can cause problems. It puts an enormous burden on the colleagues when they have to take over these tasks. (M008, male, 1960)

For some supervisors it is a clear cut question, private life prevails above the organization, also because it can harm the organization if it does not take the employees' private life into account.

If someone can't handle the combination of work and care, that person can better go home and first deal with the problems at home. (M007, female, 1964)

### 13.3.2.3 Concluding Remarks

The interviews with the supervisors in Company X show their ambivalent or contradictory attitudes towards the utilization of work-life policies by their subordinates. They support the utilization of certain policies, like part-time work, parental leave and short-term care leave, but they are less supportive regarding policies like telework, working a day at home, or child care. All supervisors acknowledge the "trade off" that follows when employees use work-life policies; utilization implies (negative) career consequences. Especially long-term work-life policies, like working part time or parental leave, are considered to damage one's career in Company X. Next to the personal consequences, the utilization of work-life policies can also harm the team or the organization, because of the increase of work demands when a team member is on leave. Even the supervisors who are most supportive mention these negative consequences. Clearly, supervisor support is not unconditional. This leads us to the question in what way the attitudes of supervisors are influencing their decisions when subordinates request the use of work-life policies.

### 13.3.3 Supervisor Allowance Decisions<sup>2</sup>

In this section we discuss how supervisors grant requests by their subordinates, i.e., the "allowance decision" concerning work-life policies in order to answer our

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<sup>2</sup>The arguments developed in this section are based on Den Dulk and Peper (2009).

final research question (How can we understand the allowance decisions made by supervisors on work-life policy request by subordinates?). First, we discuss several theoretical expectations concerning the allowance discussion. Subsequently, we will present the empirical evidence for these expectations as found by Den Dulk and De Ruijter (2008). In their study they use the dataset of the supervisors of the Dutch Company X, and data from supervisors of several other organizations in the financial sector. Our main aim here is to unravel allowance decisions made by supervisors.

Powell and Mainiero (1999) assume that supervisors take the impact of utilization of work-life policies on work outcomes into account when considering an employee request. They developed the disruptiveness hypothesis to explain managerial decision-making on work-life requests for subordinates. Their hypothesis states that supervisors take the degree to which the utilization of a work-life arrangement will disrupt the organization's work into account when considering such a request. Work-life policies can make supervisors' jobs more complex and difficult because they then have to deal with various schedules and arrange replacements when employees are on leave, while still making sure that the necessary work gets done. Powell and Mainiero (1999) distinguish several factors that influence the degree to which a supervisor will view a subordinate's request to use work-life policies as disruptive: (1) the type of work-life policy requested and the reason offered by the subordinate for making the request, and (2) the nature of the tasks, skills and responsibilities of the subordinate making the request.

Another study on the allowance decision examines dependency theory (Klein et al., 2000). The main assumption of dependency theory is that supervisors depend – to varying extents – on their subordinates. Supervisors are responsible for the results and performance of the department they manage. Their subordinates contribute – in varying degrees – to this performance. This makes supervisors dependent on their employees and the greater the employee's contribution, the more dependent the supervisor is. This may give such employees more power, not only in salary negotiations but also regarding the use of work-life policies.

Den Dulk and De Ruijter (2008) argue that both disruptiveness and dependency considerations play a role in allowance decisions and can be seen as complementary rather than contradictory. In understanding the attitudes of supervisors, it is important to consider the dilemma they face when deciding whether or not to grant employees' requests to utilize work-life policies: should they give priority to short-term departmental and organizational goals (i.e., ensure that the necessary work gets done and prevent disruption to the conduct of work), or should they give priority to long-term goals (i.e., retain valuable employees by responding to their personal and family needs)? This dilemma is particularly striking when the two sets of goals are perceived as conflicting. Supervisors cope with the dual agenda of caring for employee needs and pursuing organizational goals by utilizing different strategies, for instance, by being supportive during crises but very demanding in day-to-day working life (Das Dores Guerreiro et al., 2004).

Den Dulk and De Ruijter (2008) tested the two theories in a vignette study among a sample of 46 Dutch and British financial sector supervisors working in four different firms. Instead of focusing on whether or not supervisors grant a

request, this study examined the attitudes of supervisors toward requests by hypothetical employees. Evidence from this study generally supported the disruptiveness theory. The findings indicated that the person making the request (female versus male, supervisory position or not) and the nature of the request itself do matter. Requests by women are judged more positively than requests by men, in particular when they concern taking up leave, indicating that care duties are seen mainly as a woman's responsibility. Requests made by supervisors are judged more negatively than requests by employees who do not supervise others. In sum, the study found considerable support for disruptiveness theory. Regarding less disruptive requests, for example short-term leave, the study found that dependency arguments were also important. When the labor market is tight and it is difficult to find new employees, supervisors were (even) more positive about short-term care leave. The conclusion is that supervisors consider both the degree of disruptiveness and employee needs, as well as the risk of losing valuable personnel in allowance decisions.

However, the study did not produce the same results with respect to requests to work from home occasionally, another arrangement that can be considered as relatively non-disruptive. This finding might be explained by the fact that working from home gives rise to new coordination and control problems (e.g., Peters and Den Dulk, 2003), which supervisors may perceive as making their tasks more complex and difficult. We also have to consider the possibility that supervisors may combine a negative attitude with positive decision-making. Even though a supervisor might be negative about requests by employees on whom he/she depends most, as granting the request will complicate the work in the short term, the risk of the employee leaving the department might lead the supervisor to grant the request anyway. This is an issue that should be taken into account in future research.

## 13.4 Conclusions and Discussion

### 13.4.1 Conclusions

The central findings of Sect. 13.2 are linked to the four research questions and hypotheses guiding this section in Table 13.5. With regard to the first research question (What is the utilization of work-life policies among Dutch professionals?), we can conclude that flextime, working from home, and part-time work were the most frequently used arrangements in both samples. Every Dutch employee has the right to adjust his or her working hours and this particular arrangement is used frequently in the Netherlands, particularly by women (OECD, 2007). Working flexible hours and occasionally working from home are both flexible work-life policies, which may greatly enhance professionals' flexibility regarding the time and place they work. However, in contrast to part-time work – which has to be formally arranged in one's employment contract – utilization of these two policies may be based upon an *informal* agreement between employee and supervisor. Moreover, both flexible work-life policies do not reduce professionals' work hours and, therefore, may not impede their career advancement (see the fourth research question). This may explain the high utilization of these policies, in particular within the “up-or-out” culture characterizing Company X.

**Table 13.5** Overview of research questions, hypotheses, findings, and practical implications

Research question	Hypothesis	Findings	Practical implications
(1) What is the utilization of work-life policies among Dutch professionals?	–	Flexitime, working from home, and part time work are the most frequently used arrangements in both samples	Make professionals (and supervisors) familiar with the whole spectrum of work-life policies offered
(2) What is the association of work-life policies with work-life culture?	High levels of work-life culture support and low levels of barriers are related to high utilization of work-life policies (H1)	Support is positively related to utilization of working from home in Sample Y; barriers are positively associated with the uptake of childcare subsidies (both samples), working from home, and parental leave (Company X)	Supervisors should explicitly support their employees' work-life integration when they want to increase the uptake of work-life policies or positive spillover between their employees' work and private life by, for example, clearly defining expectations, goals and resources at work and at home in order to make a "road map" for professional and personal success
(3) What is the association of work-life policies and work-life culture with work-life enrichment?	High levels of work-life culture support and low levels of barriers are related to high levels of work-life enrichment (H2) Employees using work-life policies will report high levels of work-life and life-work enrichment (H3)	Support is positively related to enrichment in both samples; working from home is positively related to work-life enrichment (via support), and part-time work is positively associated with life-work enrichment in Sample Y	

Table 13.5 (continued)

Research question	Hypothesis	Findings	Practical implications
(4) What is the association of utilization of work-life policies with career advancement?	Employees working part time or taking up parental leave have lower job levels compared to those working full time (H4)	Working part time and taking up parental leave are unfavorable in terms of Dutch professionals' career advancement in Sample Y	An open discussion between supervisors and professionals on utilization of work-life policies and its impact on career advancement is important, as well as the introduction of incentives or rewards for implementing work-life policies and supervisor training in the tools that would allow them to successfully implement work-life policies
(5) What are the experiences with and attitudes of supervisors regarding work-life policies?	–	Supervisors show a contradictory attitude towards the uptake of work-life policies by their subordinates by only supporting certain policies (e.g., part-time work and parental leave), and by acknowledging the “trade off” when employees use work-life policies for their career and work team	
(6) How can we understand the allowance decisions made by supervisors on work-life policy request by subordinates?	–	Supervisors consider both the degree of disruptiveness and employee needs as well as the risk of losing valuable personnel in allowance decisions; inconsistency between attitudes and allowance behavior is possible	

The uptake of the compressed ( $4 \times 9$ ) workweek and the care-related policies (i.e., parental leave, and childcare subsidies) was low. This is not surprising given the fact that parental leave (26% in 2007) is not used frequently in general by Dutch parents who are eligible to use this arrangement (Merens and Hermans, 2009). In addition, childcare subsidies are nowadays granted by a standardized union of the Dutch government and employers. Therefore, additional subsidies or arrangements are not frequently offered by Dutch employers. The compressed workweek is a relatively new and innovative work-life policy in the Netherlands, which is not yet present in many companies.

Turning to the second research question (What is the association of work-life policies with work-life culture?), we can conclude that – as expected – work-life culture support was positively related to utilization of working from home in Sample Y. However, we also found that barriers were positively associated with the uptake of childcare subsidies in both samples, and that professionals perceiving high levels of barriers worked from home and used parental leave frequently in Company X. A possible explanation for this counterintuitive finding may be that these associations are reversed in nature. Because we have employed a cross-sectional design to collect data from both samples, we cannot test the causal direction of the associations found. From a hypothetical point of view it is plausible, however, that employees who do not use work-life policies are not aware of the negative career consequences or organizational time demands associated with their uptake. In contrast, employees who start using work-life policies may be confronted with these barriers. In a recent longitudinal study by Dikkers and Demerouti (under review), support was found for a reversed causal path between utilization of work-life policies and work-life culture: utilization of working from home predicted employees' perceptions of work-life culture 1 year later.

With regard to the third research question (What is the association of work-life policies and work-life culture with work-life enrichment?), we can conclude that support was positively related to work-life enrichment in both samples and to life-work enrichment in Company X. Furthermore, working from home was positively associated with work-life enrichment via support, and part-time work was positively associated with life-work enrichment in Sample Y.

With regard to the fifth and sixth research questions, the present study clearly shows that the attitudes of supervisors are very important in understanding why many employees are not taking advantage of the wide range of work-life policies on offer nowadays. The attitudes of supervisors are not only important in understanding managerial decision-making with respect to requests to utilize work-life policies, but are also crucial in understanding the requesting behavior of employees. Supervisor support is by no means unconditional. The evidence found in several studies suggests that managers generally take a short-term view of work-life policies rather than a long-term view that cherishes human capital. They do not (yet) consider that employees' work-life balance contributes to organizational goals (see also the "Dual Agenda" concept, Rapoport, 2002). If, however, organizations wish to retain valuable human capital, future policies should offer supervisors additional incentives or rewards for implementing work-life policies, for example, by introducing facilities

to manage the disruption in work. Moreover, several studies note that managers are generally unaware of existing policies and lack training in the tools that would allow them to implement policies successfully. Not surprisingly, many studies find inconsistencies in policy implementation and variations in management attitudes and behavior toward work-life policies.

### ***13.4.2 Practical Implications***

We would like to distinguish between practical implications intended for professionals and those targeted at their supervisors or employers. One important implication of the conclusions drawn above for the professional employees is that they should become well acquainted with the work-life policies offered by their employer if they have not yet done so. In both samples studied in this section, professional employees did not frequently use most policies. It may be possible that professionals are only aware of the existence of several well-known policies such as flextime, and therefore only use these arrangements, while their employer offers a larger variety of policies such as the compressed workweek or calamity leave. Being familiar with the whole spectrum of work-life policies available to them may supply professionals with the tools needed to balance work with responsibilities at home. This is supported by our finding that working from home was positively associated with work-life enrichment and that part-time work was positively associated with life-work enrichment.

Simultaneously, employers should explicitly communicate the work-life policies available to their professional employees. Hopkins (2005) suggests that supervisors can support their employees in (better) balancing their work with their responsibilities at home by being knowledgeable about work-life programs and policies and by disseminating information about these policies. In addition, she offers several other proposals for supervisors to demonstrate concrete support for work-life integration. Case studies of supervisors who are supportive show that they clearly define work expectations in terms of results and simultaneously “ask employees to identify the important goals, concerns, and demands outside the office hat require time and energy” (Friedman et al., 1998, p. 121). Supervisors subsequently use this information to draw a “road map” toward professional and personal success.

Another practical implication is that supervisors should take work-life culture into account when considering utilization of work-life policies. We found that professionals perceiving high levels of support in integrating work and private life reported high utilization of working from home, as well as high levels of work-life and life-work enrichment. However, those working from home or using parental leave also reported negative career consequences and time demands (barriers). Therefore, it is imperative that employers consider their company’s (and their own) attitude towards their employees’ work-life integration when they want to increase the uptake of work-life policies or positive spillover between their employees’ work and private life.

Finally, we would like to advise professionals to seriously consider the possible impact that utilization of different types of work-life policies may have on their (extrinsic) career success. If one primarily aims at getting ahead in one’s career

within a short period of time, the uptake of arrangements such as part-time work and parental leave may not be advisable. However, if one prefers a career that varies from the traditional linear career altogether, and in which other priorities (such as gaining expertise or raising a family) are considered to be important, the impact of utilization of work-life arrangements on one's extrinsic career success may be less relevant than, for example, its impact on intrinsic career success (e.g., job satisfaction).

In a similar vein, we would like to advise supervisors to support their professional employees in using the work-life policies of their choice. Supervisors are the ones making decisions regarding employees' career advancement. If they are opposed to their subordinates using policies which will (structurally or temporarily) reduce their work hours, they may feel less inclined to consider them for promotion. It is, therefore, imperative, that supervisors realize their role in the impact of work-life policies on their subordinates' extrinsic career success. By openly discussing perspectives on work-life policies and their possible effect on (different types of) career advancement with their subordinates, supervisors can reduce the uncertainty or even barriers withholding employees from using (certain) policies. This discussion could be part of regular work meetings in which the "road map for professional and personal success" as mentioned above is jointly developed and refined by supervisors and their employees.

### ***13.4.3 Theoretical Implications for Future Research***

Research has shown it is often very difficult to change an organization, and even more difficult to change an organization's culture (see, e.g., Haas et al., 2000). An organization's work-life culture may range from very positive to very negative. The work-life culture is positive when the organization considers work-life balance important, when utilizing work-life arrangements has few consequences for employees' careers, and when the standards set for working hours allow scope for family duties. However, the work-life culture of an organization can also contain contradictory elements (Den Dulk and Peper, 2007; Kirby, 2000; Lewis, 2003). An organization may show concern for its employees' work-life balance, for example, but at the same time associate employee commitment with attendance and working long hours. In other words, the organization may support employees in their efforts to achieve a good work-life balance – for example, by introducing work-life arrangements – but simultaneously place time demands on the employees that conflict with the actual use of such measures. Future research would profit from examining this contradictory work-life culture in more detail, instead of crudely distinguishing between cultures that are either supportive or unsupportive towards the utilization of work-life policies and work-life balance in general.

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